Agile Software Development: The People Factor

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m a previous article ("Agile Software Development: The Business of Innovation," Computer, Sept. 2001, pp. 120-122), we introduced agile software development through the problem it addresses and the way in which it addresses the problem. Here, we describe the effects of working in an agile style.

AGILE RECAPPED

Over recent decades, while market forces, systems requirements, implementation technology, and project staff were changing at a steadily increasing rate, a different development style showed its advantages over the traditional one. This agile style of development directly addresses the problems of rapid change.

A dominant idea in agile development is that the team can be more effective in responding to change if it can

- reduce the cost of moving information between people, and
- reduce the elapsed time between making a decision to seeing the consequences of that decision.

To reduce the cost of moving information between people, the agile team works to

- · place people physically closer,
- replace documents with talking in person and at whiteboards, and
- improve the team's amicability—ies sense of community and morale so that people are more inclined to relay valuable information quickly.

and skills of individuals and molds process to specific people and teams, not the other way around.

AGILE IS FOR PEOPLE

The most important implication to managers working in the agile manner is that it places more emphasis on people factors in the project; amicability, talent, skill, and communication.

These qualities become a primary concern for the would-be agile team. Skill development is important, so that each person can deliver more value with time.

The attention to the human issues gives agile projects a particular feel. It is



Agile development focuses on the talents and skills of individuals, molding the process to specific people and teams.

To reduce the time from decision to feedback, the agile team

- makes user experts available to the team or, even better, part of the team and
- works incrementally.

Making user experts available as part of the team gives developers rapid feedback on the implications to the user of their design choices. The user experts, seeing the growing software in its earliest stages, learn both what the developers misunderstood and also which of their requests do not work as well in practice as they had thought.

The term agile, coined by a group of people experienced in developing software this way, has two distinct connotations.

The first is the idea that the business and technology worlds have become turbulent, high speed, and uncertain, requiring a process to both create change and respond rapidly to change.

The first connotation implies the second one: An agile process requires responsive people and organizations. Agile development focuses on the talents not simply a matter of reducing paperwork and hoping that everything else will fall into place. To paraphrase one developer, "A small, rigorous methodology may look the same as an agile methodology, but it won't feel the same."

The agile group-concept grows to spun teams, organizations, and other working relationships. It is very difficult for agile people to function well in a rigid organization—and vice versa.

INDIVIDUAL COMPETENCE

Agile development teams focus on individual competency as a critical factor in project success.

If the people on the project are good enough, they can use almost any process and accomplish their assignment. If they are not good enough, no process will repair their inadequacy—"people trump process" is one way to say this.

However, lack of user and executive support can kill a project—"politics trump people." Inadequate support can keep even good people from accomplishing the job.

The "CHAOS Chronicles Version II," a recent update of the Chaos Report

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Table of Contents Agile Software Development The People Factor Pdf

- 1. Understanding the eBook Agile Software Development The People Factor Pdf
 - \circ The Rise of Digital Reading Agile Software Development The People Factor Pdf
 - Advantages of eBooks Over Traditional Books
- 2. Identifying Agile Software Development The People Factor Pdf
 - Exploring Different Genres
 - Considering Fiction vs. Non-Fiction
 - Determining Your Reading Goals
- 3. Choosing the Right eBook Platform
 - Popular eBook Platforms
 - \circ Features to Look for in an Agile Software Development The People Factor Pdf
 - User-Friendly Interface
- 4. Exploring eBook Recommendations from Agile Software Development The People Factor Pdf
 - Personalized Recommendations
 - Agile Software Development The People Factor Pdf User Reviews and Ratings
 - Agile Software Development The People Factor Pdf and Bestseller Lists
- 5. Accessing Agile Software Development The People Factor Pdf Free and Paid eBooks
 - Agile Software Development The People Factor Pdf Public Domain eBooks

- Agile Software Development The People Factor Pdf eBook Subscription Services
- o Agile Software Development The People Factor Pdf Budget-Friendly Options
- 6. Navigating Agile Software Development The People Factor Pdf eBook Formats
 - ePub, PDF, MOBI, and More
 - Agile Software Development The People Factor Pdf Compatibility with Devices
 - Agile Software Development The People Factor Pdf Enhanced eBook Features
- 7. Enhancing Your Reading Experience
 - Adjustable Fonts and Text Sizes of Agile Software Development The People Factor Pdf
 - o Highlighting and Note-Taking Agile Software Development The People Factor Pdf
 - o Interactive Elements Agile Software Development The People Factor Pdf
- 8. Staying Engaged with Agile Software Development The People Factor Pdf
 - Joining Online Reading Communities
 - Participating in Virtual Book Clubs
 - Following Authors and Publishers Agile Software Development The People Factor Pdf
- 9. Balancing eBooks and Physical Books Agile Software Development The People Factor Pdf
 - Benefits of a Digital Library
 - Creating a Diverse Reading Collection Agile Software Development The People Factor Pdf
- 10. Overcoming Reading Challenges
 - o Dealing with Digital Eye Strain
 - Minimizing Distractions
 - Managing Screen Time
- 11. Cultivating a Reading Routine Agile Software Development The People Factor Pdf
 - Setting Reading Goals Agile Software Development The People Factor Pdf
 - Carving Out Dedicated Reading Time
- 12. Sourcing Reliable Information of Agile Software Development The People Factor Pdf
 - Fact-Checking eBook Content of Agile Software Development The People Factor Pdf
 - Distinguishing Credible Sources
- 13. Promoting Lifelong Learning
 - Utilizing eBooks for Skill Development
 - Exploring Educational eBooks

14. Embracing eBook Trends

- Integration of Multimedia Elements
- Interactive and Gamified eBooks

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